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Effective Use of Children's Literature for ESL/EFL Young Learners

EFFECTIVE USE OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE FOR ESL/EFL YOUNG LEARNERS

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Abstract

Mainly intended for readers from birth to age twelve, according to Galda (2000), children's literature is the major source to inform young learners about social norms, to teach them different subject matters and to help them develop an interest in pleasure reading. Drawn upon the socio-constructivist's theoretical perspective, this article identifies several benefits of using children's literature for young learners who study English as a second/foreign language, including 1) facilitating language and literacy development; 2) promoting intercultural understanding and 3) improving critical thinking skills. To maximize the strengths of children's literature, language teachers must take into account students' reading levels and carefully avoid books which reflect gender/ cultural biases. It is also strongly advised that teachers' instruction encourages students' personal connections, multiple interpretations as well as critical evaluations of a text.

Keywords: children's literature, critical literacy, ESL/EFL, multicultural children's literature, reading instruction

INTRODUCTION

Until the early 1980s, the common belief about reading was that it was a mechanical process of decoding words in order to retrieve meaning from the text. Consequently, grade-appropriate basal readers along with workbooks and worksheets had dominated many reading classrooms (Moore, 2002). Viewing language learning as a whole-to-part process, however, Whole Language advocates argue that children become skilled and motivated readers when they are immersed in a print-rich environment in which authentic reading materials are accessible. Such belief has led to the literature-based reading approach as well as more publications of quality

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children's literature (Morrow & Gambrell, 2000), a main source for promoting young children's overall linguistic competence.

In the section that follows, I will provide an overview on the role of children's literature in ESL/EFL instruction. I will then focus my discussion on recommending strategies about effectively incorporating such reading material into one's curriculum design.

DEFINITION OF CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

In their book *Literature for Young children*, Glazer and Giorgis (2005) categorize most children's books into 1) toy and board books, 2) wordless books, 3) picture books, 4) concept books and 5) chapter books, which use depends upon the child's age or his stage of linguistic development. In particular, they consider picture books, usually between 24 and 48 pages, reading material that can facilitate young children's literacy proficiency due to their dual presentation of text and illustrations. Note that Temple and colleagues (1998) distinguish picture storybooks from illustrated books; beyond merely visual decoration, the drawing in picture storybooks plays an equally significant part in children's reading comprehension.

In terms of genre, Glazer and Giorgis conclude that children's literature is largely presented in three common forms, namely poetry, fiction and nonfiction. While nonfiction consists of factual information such as concepts about colors or famous people's biographies, fiction tells stories that can be entirely imaginative, e.g. folktales, mythology and so forth.

Owing to its authentic language use, appealing story plots and delightful illustrations, children's literature is a great teaching tool for promoting young children's motivation to read. Such motivation, as attested by many researchers, contributes to one's overall language and literacy development.

BENEFITS OF USING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Scholars and educators have been interested in investigating the effectiveness of children's literature for young children's language education. Pedagogically speaking, it has been proven to successfully engage young children in holistic learning experiences in which early literacy and language skills are naturally acquired and practiced (Ho, 2000; Zhang, 2008). It also has the great potential for constructing and expanding children's knowledge of themselves/ about others, which promotes cross-cultural awareness (Morgan, 2009). Especially, the recent proliferation of social issue picture books can be useful resources for opening up conversations about sensitive subjects and therefore fostering critical

literacy (Lelend, et al., 1999). The ultimate hope is that young learners will be able to act upon instances of social injustice in today's less-than-perfect world.

Facilitating Language and Literacy Development

Deeply rooted in the oral tradition, the majority of children's books are to be read aloud by teachers and/or parents (Galda, 2000). During read-alouds, children begin to understand that each letter-sound association constitutes a word which carries single or more meanings parallel to oral language and that print conveys interesting messages (Galda, Ash & Cullinan, 2000). Such practices further facilitate their background knowledge, connect reading with pleasure, as well as provide "a reading role model" (Trelease, 1995, p. 9). Various studies have shown that children who are better readers upon entering elementary schools are mostly those being read to in a home setting (Cook-Cottone, 2004).

Moreover, Parmer (2002) suggests that read-alouds promote children's auditory skills, i.e. appreciating the beauty of language and acquiring word/ grammar knowledge. For example, Elley et al. (1983) discovered that, when receiving daily 20-30 minutes of "book flood" treatment in which interesting illustrated storybooks were accessible, 380 Fiji ESL 4th and 5th graders out-performed those who followed the traditional audio-lingual curriculum in reading comprehension, sentence structures, word recognition and oral sentences. In another study, Elley (1989) also found that after 157 7th-grade children were read to an interesting English picture book, the incidental vocabulary learning rate was 15 % higher than the one in the pretest. Built on the learnt knowledge of vocabulary and rhetoric structures, children are very likely to improve their oral proficiency (Hade, 1988) and writing competence (Sizoo, 2001).

Promoting Intercultural Understanding

Multicultural children's literature serves as a mirror (Bishop, 1992) as it reflects the social circumstances young children are in. Through reading, accordingly, children are acquainted with the underlying norms of a community and develop self-identities that match society's expectations. On the other hand, multicultural storybooks portray lives of the social, cultural and ethical minorities (Mendoze & Reese, 2001), which opens a new window for young learners to access cultural-ethnic groups that normally would be remote for them (Bishop et al., 1992). This cross-cultural awareness not only inhibits potential stereotypes but also allows young readers to gain a better appreciation for others. One example is that when discussing *Black Like Kyra, White Like Me* (Vigna, 1992), the participating

first-grade students showed compassion for the black character and developed attitudes against racial discrimination (Macphee, 1997).

Encouraging Critical Thinking Skills

Although some scholars believe that children's literature should present stories that are happy and innocent, some others passionately advocate that children need to be informed about the real-life conflicts and problems (McClure, 1995). Recently, with the rapid growth of social issue books exploring sensitive topics of bullying, racial discrimination, homelessness, etc., young readers are given the opportunity to closely examine the living environment they are in and best prepare themselves for adulthood. Properly guided by teachers, social issue books as well help children recognize and possibly challenge any framing of certain social-cultural groups prevalent in a given text (Lelend, et al. 1999; Lewison, et al. 2002). While reading *Whitewash*, for instance, the children were able to generate a thoughtful discussion on hate crimes (Heffernan & Lewison, 2000). Their ability to take a critical stance on social issues makes possible for them to take further action against injustice.

CONCERNS ABOUT USING CHILDREN'S LITERATURE

Gender Bias

Despite the favorable effects on young learners' overall language development, children's storybooks sometimes portray biased gender roles, such as women working as nurturers/ housewives (Kortenhaus & Demarest, 1993) or men showing no emotions and only having stereotypical hobbies/occupations (Singh, 1998). It is strongly argued that teachers must choose appropriate reading materials in fostering young children's positive gender attitudes, e.g. including an equal amount of male and female characters, using gender-free language as well as presenting multi-dimensional female traits other than a home setting (Kuo, 2005; Morgan, 2009; Trepanier-Street & Romatowski, 1999).

Cultural Authenticity

The issue of cultural authenticity has become a growing concern and thus requires careful examination (Trousedale, 1990). One prime example, as Mendoza and Reese (2001) points out, is the troublesome storylines and illustrations in the famous award-winning picture book *Brother Eagle, Sister Sky*, written by a European author about Native American history. To assist young learners' construction of proper world knowledge, Bishop (1992) suggests the following guidelines: 1) look for books written by "insiders"; 2)

check publication dates; 3) examine the illustrations; and 4) present a variety of books regarding one community so as to avoid stereotypes. She further explains that the so-called outsider writers may still succeed in producing authentic pieces of stories conditional on their genuine effort to understand the target group they write about.

Problematic Reading Instruction

Teachers can jeopardize students' reading achievements by mistakenly giving problematic instructions. Researchers have found that teachers tend to select books containing insufficient amounts of characters that are ethnic minorities, the elderly or females (Smith et al., 1987). And they are more prone to give favorable feedback to children whose responses conform to their expectations (Buchanan, 1989). Perhaps the worst of all, they may sometimes lack necessary knowledge to implement an appropriate literature-based curriculum (Gardner, 1988). For instance, a study conducted by Mikulecky (1996) has uncovered that the factor which facilitates children's literacy development is not necessarily the read-aloud, but it can also be the social interaction in the learning context. Therefore, language teachers who are unaware of such fundamental argument for use of read-aloud might discourage children's spontaneous responses to or questions about a story during the book-reading, which diminishes chances for learning.

DISCUSSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Language teachers play a key role in securing the effectiveness of children's literature. Specifically, their reading instruction needs to elicit young learners' emotional responses, allow individual interpretations as well as encourage critical reflection. Moreover, teachers should choose materials that are linguistically appropriate and portray authentic socio-cultural images. Fortunately, the thriving online libraries open up a lot more possibilities for their book-selection.

Meaningful Reading Practices

Language teachers need to provide sustained practices in developing students' awareness of reading as personal, pleasurable and meaningful so they do not sacrifice the strengths of picture books. Strategies include encouraging individual reader responses and facilitating critical discussions.

Individual Reader Responses

In creating what Rosenblatt (1978) described as a “live-through experience”, readers should be encouraged to make emotional connections with the text beyond simply searching for factual information. To begin with, teachers can simply start a conversation by asking for students’ opinions concerning the reading material and if/how their feelings relate to their own life experiences. Teachers may then plan more elaborate activities that elicit students’ verbal or written comments. Examples are 1) Audio Journals: audio-recording responses to share with the class; 2) Graffiti Board: reporting findings, questions and surprises on a large piece of paper; 3) Readers Theater: reading aloud as assigned characters; 4) Tableau: acting out one scene that students remember most vividly from the book as if in a frozen picture.; 5) Open Mind: drawing down any random thoughts; and finally 6) I am Poem: making a poem to describe any character or idea. Note that Asian learners may especially appreciate creating aesthetic responses, namely drama, drawing and poem-writing, as the commonly existing Grammar/Translation curricula often deprive them of such practices.

Another possibility is to bring in multimedia materials such as films and music to supplement the reading. Over the years, movie companies have produced numerous animated movies adapted from famous children’s stories, e.g. different versions of *Cinderella* and *Snow White*, *How the Grinch Stole Christmas* (2000), *Shrek* (2001), *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory* (2005), etc. Studying these movie clips or theme songs can be rather engaging.

Interactive and Critical Discussions

Language teachers can promote students’ reading engagement through interactive and critical classroom discussions. Several methods can be effective if implemented with discretion: 1) Critical Inquiries (Lewison & Leland, 2002): enabling students to develop multiple perspectives and possibly reconstruct their self-identities; 2) Shared Reading and Literature Circle: both emphasizing social interactions among peers; and 3) Save the Last Word for Me and 4/3/2 Activity: ensuring student accountability in classroom discussions. The underlying belief is that when sharing or challenging one another’s ideas, students are most likely to develop a deeper understanding of as well as interest in the text. Below is a description of how to implement the above-mentioned exercises:

- Critical Inquiry: 1) Interrogating the commonplace: to raise questions about what is usually taken for granted. 2) Questioning power relationships: to recognize that language is at the service of only certain

social/cultural groups. 3) Appreciating multiple realities and viewpoints: to develop fresh understanding about diverse cultures.

- Shared Reading: Students read silently in pairs/ small groups but can turn to peers for help if encountering reading incomprehension.
- Literature Circle: Students meet in a small group and have open-ended discussions on a piece of literature they are reading.
- Save the Last Word for Me: Students select one quote or passage from an assigned text to share with their classmates in small groups. After one student explains reason(s) for choosing the quote/passage, group members give comments. The student eventually wraps up the discussion by responding to peer feedback.
- 4/3/2 Activity: Originally designed to promote speaking fluency, this activity allows students to not only express thoughts without interruption but also practice productive vocabulary from the text: A student first talks to one partner about a given topic for 4 minutes. S/he then moves on to repeating the same subject to the 2nd partner for 3 minutes and the 3rd partner for 2 minutes. Meanwhile, the listening partners cannot interrupt. When the final round is finished, the speakers and listeners switch roles.

Proper Materials

Young students may not be fully aware of the wide range of quality children's literature available on the market. Thus, it is crucial that language teachers carefully select texts which deal with different themes and match students' current reading level.

Diverse Themes

Teachers and students can together explore children's literature dealing with a variety of subjects. To do so, teachers can consider conducting a focused study on a subject that students find interesting or relevant to their daily lives. For instance, picture books like *Daddy's Roommate* (Willhoite, 1990), *King & King* (Haan & Nijland, 2002), and *King & King & Family* (Haan & Nijland, 2004) can be helpful materials for students who wish to investigate the issue of same-sex marriage. Likewise, students may gain insight into hate crimes by studying *Whitewash* (Shange, 1997), *Smoky Night* (Bunting, 1999), *The Other Side* (Woodson, 2001) and *Mississippi Morning* (Vander Zee, 2004). Another more efficient alternative is to engage the whole class in focused studies as individual groups. While presenting findings about different topics, students not only advance their knowledge of content areas but also quickly become familiar with the diversity of current publications.

Reading Levels

Two concerns should be taken into consideration in determining the appropriateness of reading levels. First, language teachers need to be cautious about the insufficient and sometimes conflicting grade-level information supplied by publishers and bookstores. For example, the online bookstore *Amazon* rates one book, *Tea with Milk* (Say, 1999), as suitable for readers from age 4 to 8. In the same section, however, *School Library Journal* categorizes the reading level as Kindergarten-6th grade. The varying and inadequate grade-level information is misleading and especially troublesome for EFL teachers who do not always have the privilege of previewing a book prior to putting it in order. Consequently, it is advised that publishers 1) design clear rationales for distinguishing reading levels and specify the types of knowledge students can expect to learn, e.g. rhymes, colors, vocabulary or narrative writing. Such information should be made public; 2) consider providing more sample pages online; 3) regularly distribute samples of material to schools and teachers; and 4) start electronic forums for teachers of the same interest to share selection and use of children's literature in their classrooms.

Additionally, teachers should critically examine students' learning needs when choosing reading materials. For a class in which students have a great diversity of English reading behaviors and difficulties, teachers can consider using the following steps in the form of a course project:

- Collect demographic information concerning students' reading behaviors, self-assessed proficiency and particular reading difficulties/interests.
- Select different reading materials for specific reading needs/purposes. That is, to facilitate young learners with incidental vocabulary acquisition, teachers should use books which 95 % of the texts are comprehensible (Laufer, 1992). To develop a reading habit, Hulstijn (2001) suggests utilizing materials one step behind students' current stage of linguistic competence (i minus 1). Same rule of thumb might also apply to learners who choose to work on pronunciation; reading aloud easy texts consisting of familiar words can be less intimidating.
- Utilize classroom or school libraries. Allow free reading time in class, e.g. one third of the class period, so that students can access books that are level-appropriate (following the guideline illustrated in the previous paragraph) and to their liking. If the school curriculum makes in-class free reading impossible, require students to read after class.
- Using a checklist, have students report back the weekly reading they

have completed and whether they have progressed in the specific problem(s) they are focusing on. If time allows, teachers may want to hold routine interviews with individual students to avoid inaccurate self-assessment.

Taking Advantage of Internet Resources

Mikulecky (2007) has recommended utilizing online reading materials to overcome problems of expense and access. The International Children's Digital Library (ICDL, <http://en.childrenslibrary.org/>) may be beneficial for language teachers who are interested in incorporating children's literature into their curricula. First, aiming to promote children's literacy proficiency and cultural understanding, ICDL already has a collection of over 4470 books in 55 languages, accessible to all users. Second, ICDL provides detailed publisher information and categorizes their collections in various ways, i.e. age, genre, format, length and language. Therefore, readers can easily find materials that are interesting and linguistically appropriate. Third, ICDL creates a friendly environment in which readers can write book reviews online and interact with others. With free access to a large volume of electronic books at any time, young children are likely to become motivated and autonomous readers.

CONCLUSION

Various research findings have revealed that children's literature is a great tool for ESL/EFL young children's overall language and literacy competence. In particular, picture books dealing with different cultures or social issues can promote intercultural understanding and social justice. Children's literature, nonetheless, is only beneficial when it includes egalitarian perspectives on gender, presents authentic portrayals of socio-cultural communities and is introduced properly using a literature-based curriculum. To make best use of such genre, language teachers need to critically reflect on their own instructional approach and examine the linguistic appropriateness of reading materials available in the market. This article finally calls for future investigation into the helpfulness of electronic picture books on ESL/EFL students' literacy development as opposed to traditional paper books.

THE AUTHOR

Hsiang-Ni Lee has a Master's degree in TESOL and a Ph.D. in Language Education. Based upon her own observations of the difficulties Taiwanese students are facing, she has focused her attention on researching and coming up with alternative instructional approaches and materials for EFL reading. Currently, Hsiang-Ni Lee is interested in children's literature, family literacy, literature-based reading instruction and material development. In the future, she also wishes to explore the multiple possibilities of utilizing technology in language education.

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